

Expert Voices on Atrocity Prev...tion Ep 41 Jean-Pierre Lacroix

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Jean-Pierre Lacroix



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:46

Today, I'm joined by Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, who has been UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations since 2017. Prior to this, he served as Director for United Nations, International Organizations, Human Rights and Francophonie at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during which time he was also the French R2P Focal Point. We're excited to welcome Under-Secretary-Lacroix here as part of our series commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Responsibility to Protect. Thank you for joining us today. Can you give us an overview of your role as Head of UN Peace Operations, and how the role has evolved over your years in office and adapted to emergent civilian protection concerns.



Jean-Pierre Lacroix 01:25

So my role, and the role of the Department of Peace Operation, which I oversee, is really about supporting the peacekeepers in the field, the men and women, the military, the civilian, the police, who are working in places such as the Central African Republic or UNIFIL, and very much

involved in protecting civilians and trying to at least stabilize very volatile and unstable situations. Are also very much about trying to support peace efforts by their presence.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 02:03

Excellent, and how has the capacity of UN missions to respond to early warning signs evolved over the past 20 years, since the establishment of R2P and also the expansion of PoC mandates?

J Jean-Pierre Lacroix 02:17

Well, first of all, the protection of civilian is very much at the center of what our peacekeepers are doing. We have five peacekeeping operations with explicit protection of civilian mandates. Those are UNISFA in Abyei, MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, MONUSCO in DR Congo, UNIFIL in Lebanon, UNMISS in South Sudan. But I should say that, even when those the peacekeepers do not have an explicit protection of civilian mandate, by doing what they do, by protecting ceasefire, by monitoring violations of ceasefire, by preventing cease fires from unraveling, which is, I would say, the most kind of traditional mission of peacekeepers. Then they also protect civilians by definition, because preventing hostilities from resuming is also quite critical from that respect. Now in terms of how peacekeepers essentially prevent, you know, violations of human rights and violence against civilians. First of all, I want to emphasize that it's really one of the top priorities, and especially about prevention, because as peacekeepers, you want to be able to preempt, prevent violence from emerging, rather than having to react to this. And we've been working a lot on that prevention aspect. How do we do this? Well, I think that goes to the core of what protection of civilian is, because protection of civilian is not only about responding with uniform peacekeepers to cases of violence, it's really about preventing. How do you prevent that? First of all, we need to establish a relation of trust with the communities, because the communities are usually well-positioned to detect early signs of threats against them. So that's number one, and this is a role of our civil affairs colleagues. This is really the role of all those who are keeping a very close interaction with the communities. Now second, how do we improve our capacity to track these signs of emerging threats through technology? I think it's critically important to make the best use of available technological tools, to monitor what goes on on social media, we can use some artificial intelligence tools to sort of detect various signs that would potentially point to an emerging threat on civilians; and I also believe that we have improved our capacity to react. Now that here the essential point is about how to be mobile enough, how to be able to quickly react to a case of violence against civilians, and this is really about sort of the optimal positioning of our peacekeepers, the military, the police, the civilians, and how also we can bring them as quickly as possible to a place where civilians are threatened. So you see, there's combination of both, building trust with the communities, making sure that they are confident that by sharing with us, you know what they sense from the situation in in their area, then we, you know, we can help them as best as we can, you know, prevent threats against them, but also using technologies and and having the best possible ability to quickly react to emerging or actual cases of violence. So this is really how you know we operate. But I think it's also important to underline that once as peacekeepers, there is a reaction to a threat to to civilian population, then I think it's important to try to detect exactly what are the causes for these threats and how we can address them. Sometimes it can be relatively simple to resolve those by

implementing a project that would alleviate the suffering of a particular category of civilian sometimes it's much more complicated than this. I think protection of civilian needs to factor in what I call the key drivers of conflict, and maybe we can talk about that later./

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 07:34

I think that's that's such an important, you know, approach to really understand the nature of conflict. And that's, you know, something that we do a lot in our work is trying to understand, you know, when is violence opportunistic, when is it about criminality, and when is it part of a larger pattern that could lead to atrocity crimes? The tragedies in Rwanda and Srebrenica remain stark reminders of the international community's failure to prevent atrocities, where much of the blame was pinned on UN missions. You know how, if at all, has the concept of R2P or atrocity prevention influenced peace operations as a guiding principle, particularly in terms of shaping the UN's approach to preventing atrocities and upholding the principles of protection of civilians?

J Jean-Pierre Lacroix 08:22

Well, I think that will happen over the last, let's say, two and a half decades, and particularly after Srebrenica and Rwanda, was that there has been an increased expectations that protection of civilians need to be really at the core, certainly, of what we do and and this is embodied in the in the mandates that we have. And I refer to those missions that are currently mandated to, you know, with explicit protection of civilian tasks. And these are the biggest of our peacekeeping operation by far. And I think R2P really helped in that regard, and R2P is, is an approach, is a concept, is, you know, we have our own mandates. And of course, they, even though they don't refer explicitly to R2P, I think the R2P approach has really influenced the shaping of these mandates in the direction of putting a much greater emphasis on protection of civilians. It is challenging. I think, let's face it, because being mandated to protect civilians raises expectations that are difficult to meet, because the challenge is the magnitude of the violence and threats against civilians. Is often, you know, in of a larger scale than you know, what peacekeepers can do with the resources, with the, you know, with the presence that they can have in, you know, in some but maybe not all, areas affected by conflict, but at the same time, I think it's, it's all, let's say, you know, so much in full conformity with the key values, the key principle of UN Charter that. And then I think you know, it makes total sense to prioritize protection of civilians in peacekeeping mandates now, and we've had to adapt to this in different ways. I think we we've moved from a rather sort of maybe simple approach to peacekeeping, to protection of

J Jean-Pierre Lacroix 11:04

civilian to more complex ones, which, as I indicated, the dimension having to do with the, you know, civilian affairs and interaction with communities and bringing in different groups, women, youth, you know, to these processes, making sure that we use those technological tools. And I should add that another dimension, which we're currently, you know, very busy with, is how to counter missing this information, because those phenomena, are not new, but they're massively impacting a very negative manner, the protection of civilians. So we have to really counter mis- and disinformation, which are weaponized really against the peacekeepers, but

also the civilians. So we were adapting to all of this. And the, you know, the reality is that the peacekeeping missions, and especially the big ones, the one that I mentioned in, mostly in Africa, they're essentially judged by their ability to protect civilians. So it's also a reality that we have to face again. It's challenging, but it's it's a reality which I completely understand.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 12:31

Absolutely, and, you know, I understand the, you know, as you said, the magnitude and the scale of the violence that they're kind of positioned to confront is enormous, you know, and obviously, sadly, just last month, many peacekeepers were killed in attacks in the DRC. So it is a challenging operating environment for sure. You know, I want to pick up on what you were saying earlier that the protection of civilians is not just about uniformed military and police, and there's obviously civilian affairs. And you know, the inclusion of PoC and peacekeeping mandates occurred nearly in unison with development of R2P. But there's also been another significant change in how missions approach human rights monitoring over the past 20 years, so has the inclusion of human rights components in peacekeeping missions enabled kind of the operationalization of atrocity prevention on the ground? And you know, in what ways does reporting by human rights divisions inform and contribute to decisions made with regard to the protection of civilians?

J Jean-Pierre Lacroix 13:43

Well, human rights monitoring and reporting plays a very important role on many camps. First of all, because the trends regarding human rights violation are usually a good indicator of, you know, how threats against civilians are, you know, changing are evolving, and you can really sort of predict patterns of violence based on how human rights violations are evolving, in terms of the numbers, the intensity and all this, and therefore, you know, having the most accurate and detailed information about human rights violation, then helps really enabling early intervention and also the, you know, human rights monitoring and reporting is absolutely essential to another dimension which is critical, which is accountability. Accountability is what usually civilians affected by violence really prioritize and when you meet, when I meet with the civilians affected by violence, of course, the immediate needs are very important to them, such as, you know, shelter and food and protection. But then immediately afterwards, you know, in their list of expectations really comes accountability comes very high and even though can be a very long process, because you before you actually achieve accountability in one way or another, you can't achieve accountability if you don't have documenting of human rights violation. And this is why it is so important and at the same time sensitive and difficult, because when we document and eventually report on human rights violation, then inevitably, that doesn't go down well with all the parties that are involved in in the situation which we are involved, and you've seen, I believe in the case of particularly our mission in Mali, that the reporting that was made by our mission on a particular case of human rights violation, then was, I believe, if not the cause, but maybe the catalyst for the decision of the host government to demand the termination of our mission in Mali. But being as it may, you know, it's clear that the human rights reporting and documenting and reporting component is absolutely critical to protection of civilian and also preventing preventing future atrocities.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 16:55

Since you just mentioned, you know, the the termination of the mission in Mali, there's been significant upheaval in conversations around UN peace operations over the past few years. The Mali example being a big one, as well as the DRC is request for a sort of rapid drawdown of MONUSCO that, obviously, that has been backtracked a little given the increasing violence in the east. There's also been, you know, we've seen on the UN Security Council a general reluctance of key member states to create or expand or even renew missions. So can you give an overview of the state of UN peacekeeping at the moment and the impact of these decisions on protecting populations who are enduring atrocities?

J

Jean-Pierre Lacroix 17:38

I would say that what our biggest challenge is probably the polarization across the membership. I mean, the division of member states, particularly the division across the Security Council membership, because peacekeeping operations are created by the Security Council, they're funded by Member States. They need to be counting on strong and united support by member states. And if that is not the case, then they're weakened. And it's not only peacekeeping operation that needs the that kind of strong and united political support from member states, most important is to have an equally strong and united support from member states to the political processes for each in each of the situation in which peacekeepers are involved. Because peacekeeping operations are there to support political efforts. You know, they're there to create conditions for these political efforts to be moving forward, but that also requires a strong unity and commitment from member states, which we used to have much more in the past. We don't have that anymore, and that that is a major challenge, and as a result of the lack of unity amongst the member states, particularly the members of the Security Council, we are less equipped, we are less protected as peacekeepers, when the host parties or the host authority or the host government have issues with peacekeeping operation that can happen in different ways, because we have our mandate, and the host authorities have their own priorities. And sometime those do not completely sort of converge. And you know, and I think in the case of Mali, what really happened was that, on the one hand, our missions mandate was based on a peace agreement, the so called Algiers Agreement, which our mission was deployed and created to support. But then at some point, the new authorities in Mali decided that they would privilege the military option rather than the course of action determined by the peace agreement, the Algiers agreement. And that created the complete discrepancy between the political objective of our mandate and the political objectives of the host authorities, and that was, I believe, was becoming inevitable, that at some point the mission would have serious problem, and that was the case. Now, I think in the case of the DRC, the situation is slightly different in the sense that you have in a DRC, on the one hand, 1000s of hundreds of 1000s of people that are protected by MONUSCO. And when you meet with them, I can tell you that they don't want us to leave. But at the same time, there is also in that country, frustration that is coming from the fact that, you know, we we don't have the the resources or the capacity to address all protection of civilian issues, and that creates frustration, and those frustration can eventually be manipulated and and that resonates on the public opinion that, of course. That has an impact on how the host government sees MONUSCO, depending on other factors. So what I can tell you is that, you know, this kind of situations happen. I mean it's it's not unusual for peacekeeping operation to have issues or difficulties with the host authorities. What is different now is that we can where we can not count as much on the united support of our member states to defend a peacekeeping operation where we are faced with this kind of situation. Now, the other part of your question is about the consequences of on the population, on the civilian population, of withdrawal of peacekeeping

operations. Well, I mean, you have many examples where the withdrawal of peacekeeping operations was, let's say, was gradual and warranted by the situation on the ground. And the list of countries that were successfully supported by peacekeeping operation in returning to stability is very long. You have Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Timor-Leste, El Salvador, Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia back in the 90s. I mean, at least it's very long, but, and in those cases, the peacekeeping operation was deployed to support a peace process, and that peace process was eventually successfully completed, and then the peace operation withdrew gradually, and most of these countries are much more stable than before deployment of peacekeeping operation. So it's a success story, essentially. But when peacekeeping operation have to withdraw without having completed their mission, without the peace process being completed successfully, as was the case, for example, in Darfur or in Haiti, then the consequences on the civilian population are very dire. I want to, I want to revert to the case of Haiti, because the, you know, we often hear about the negative side of peacekeeping operations, which were, you know, deployed in Haiti. And yes, there were cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, that is quite clear, and it was absolutely unacceptable, we drawing much, many lessons from that. But at the same time, in 2017, 2018 when the mission deployed in Haiti with withdrawing at the request of the Government of that country, the no one was talking about the security situation. Security situation had been solved, and that was a major step forward. And I could see that with my own eyes. I mean, I walked in, Cité Soleil, you know, which was a very dangerous, one of the very dangerous areas of Port-au-Prince, and I did that with very little by way of protection. And you could see that the situation was really under control from the point of view of security. But what was missing was completed political processes that would have provided Haiti with a stable political dispensation and then eventually, at the withdrawal of our mission, there MINUSTAH and MINUJUSTH, I mean, you could see that the situation, the political situation, began to unravel, and we are now where we are, which is a situation where gangs violence is prevalent in Haiti, and that now, you know, Haiti needs peace enforcement. It doesn't need peacekeeping for now, it needs peace enforcement. Hopefully, the current MSS will be strengthened and will be provided with more support to address this violence. So, I think basically it raises the question of, how long can a peacekeeping operation remain without progress in political processes, and that is really the challenge that we're facing in in some of our mission, political processes are now moving forward, and most of the mission, however, continue to be deployed and rightly so, because they do a lot in terms of protection of civilians and preserving ceasefire and all that kind of thing. But it is difficult to sustain that presence when you don't have significant movement forward on political efforts.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 26:35

Thank you for that. I mean, it's really an important point about how you know, peacekeeping is just one piece of a much bigger puzzle. And, you know, resolving crises around the world. And you know, I really appreciated your point on the Security Council as well, because I remember in the early 2010s, I guess, you know, the there was much more unity on the Council, and we were able to see, you know, a rapid alteration to the Côte d'Ivoire mission when there was the electoral violence, and then the Mali and CAR missions were created relatively close to each other. And now it's, it's much more of a struggle to move forward, both in terms of creating missions, ensuring those missions are well equipped, but also, you know, getting the attention that's needed to political processes and all the other elements of resolving these kind of international crises. You know, looking ahead, what do you see as the the key opportunities and risks for UN peace operations and ensuring the protection of civilians and the implementation of R2P and future conflict scenarios?

J

Jean-Pierre Lacroix 27:47

I believe that the risk, obviously, is that, you know, we're seeing more conflict, we're seeing more violation of human rights and and we're seeing that in too many cases, competition amongst member states prevail over the will to try to find a collective or a multilateral response to crisis. So that is a challenge, obviously, that is also indicative of a lesser appetite of our member states to choose a UN course of action, if I can call it that way, to respond to crisis, which, by the way, cannot be necessarily, doesn't have to be peacekeeping. Can be different forms of UN involvement. But I think what is in question really is the space that is given by Member States to the UN, for the UN to be able to respond to crisis in a meaningful way. Now, having said this, though, the other challenge is also in terms of the evolving nature of conflict. And of course, this has been a sort of evolving process over time, but we're seeing more non-state actors, armed groups. Of course, this is not new. But then the involvement of armed groups in activities such as transnational illegal activities, the exploitation of natural resources, transnational terrorism, all kinds of illegal trafficking, and we're seeing private security companies or private security outfits. Again, this is not new, but it's taking a new dimension now. We're seeing the enablers I mentioned, digital technology and fake news and the potential negative use of artificial intelligence, and we're seeing the increased impact of some of the drivers conflict, I mentioned, transnational criminal activities, but also the impact of climate change, which is really massive in most of the situation in which we're involved. And those are challenges. And at the same time, those are also opportunities, in the sense that, you know, we have to adapt to these new realities. What we cannot control is the level of unity or lack thereof of our member states that is very difficult to; but what we can control and, or at least what we have to work on, is how we can adapt. So that if first of all, keep adapting the existing peacekeeping operations, because, you know, this is they are all of them are evolving in an environment that is itself very quickly evolving, but also be prepared for new opportunities for peace operation to be created, because that may happen. You know, we, I think we have to. We should not proceed on the basis of assumption that there will be no peace operation or no peacekeeping operations in the future, because we don't know. We know that the Council, Security Council is more divided. We know that the spirit of belligerence or competition prevails across the membership today. But we also know that the history of peacekeeping is one of ebb and flow. It was up and down and up and down, and I think that, again, what that tells us is that we need to be prepared, and this is why we're working so hard to look at the future of peacekeeping. We have a different kind of work strands on that particular topic. One of them is the process that will lead up to the ministerial level meeting on the future of peacekeeping, which will be held in Germany in May, in Berlin. And another one is an even broader process, which derives from the adoption of the pact for the future in September last year. And in the pact for the future, which is a very broad document, we have a request from member states to review a peace operation that is not only peacekeeping operation, but the broad spectrum peace operation. And we're currently starting the work on this and I think to what is important to emphasize is that there is a high level of interest from our member states on those topics. So it's a bit of a paradox, because on one hand, you have a Security Council, International Community, which is much more divided on most crisis, but then on the other hand, what I can see is that the peacekeeping is a very strongly supported un activity as such. Most of the member states are actively involved in peacekeeping because they're either troop or police contributing country or members of the Security Council, or they may be involved or interested in a particular situation in which peacekeeping is involved itself. So I think that is, of course, an important asset that we have, because everything that we will do in terms of working on the adaptation of peacekeeping that is, you know, we'll have to do it with the member states. It's

very collective and collaborative process. And we have strong engagement from member states. We have strong, again, level of interest. They know that adapting peacekeeping will require from them, their support, their contribution, their IDs, their inputs. So that is the sort of the let's say, the more sort of positive outlook on peacekeeping, in spite of all the challenges, in spite of the, I mean, all the difficulties, I think there is a good momentum and a good drive to look at how peacekeeping could look like in the future. I just want to emphasize ending by in the end, peacekeeping is very much beyond the mandates, beyond what is really in the resolution of the Security Council. Obviously, we're guided by them, but in the end, it's very much about protecting civilians. It all boils down to that that's really the DNA of peacekeeping.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 34:24

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